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ABSTRACT

A corporate employee newsletter offers an ideal opportunity to discover how literacy functions as a means of assimilating individuals into a social structure. Underlying the corporate newsletter's assimilative function are the assumptions: (1) that in reading, employees rely on attitudes toward types of texts evolved within society as a whole; and (2) that employees create and enter into roles and relationships cued by the text. The newsletter is designed to resemble an ordinary newspaper, so that readers accept the newsletter as truthful and reliable. Furthermore, stories contained in the publications, such as articles praising heroic acts of particular employees, are intended to define the role of the good corporate employee. Analysis of story selection and revision also reveals that articles seek to humanize the corporation as paternal caregiver, and to portray it as active rather than passive. Because the corporate newsletter is a means of attempting to shape the attitudes and roles of readers, teachers must enable students not only to be literate, but to be critical of the messages they receive because of their literacy. Otherwise, students may be all too easily subjugated by those who would inflict identities and roles upon readers. (SG)

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Assumptions About Literacy Underlying an Employee Newsletter

According to Kathleen Gough (qtd. in Bailey and Fosheim, 1983), literacy is an enabling factor. For instance, literacy enables the evolution and flourishing of complex social units; it enables individual intellectual and artistic development. As such, literacy is a powerful social and personal tool. Without it, social and individual growth suffers. Thus, literacy is justifiably a pressing pedagogical concern. However, the focus of this presentation is not pedagogical, at least not explicitly. Instead, I wish to focus on how literacy can be enabling. For in examining how literacy fosters the development of social unit and self, I believe we will see that in our concern to help people create literate selves we must pay special heed to critical literacy: the ability to assess the realities and identities we evolve when we read and write.

One way to discover how literacy functions as an enabling factor is to examine its use as a means to assimilate individuals into a social structure. A corporation employee newsletter offers an ideal opportunity for such an investigation since its reason for being is to disseminate information about the corporation to its employees and to involve employees in corporate activities. My presentation centers on an analysis of two issues of a weekly employee newsletter from an international corporation. The analysis involves not only the final published copies, but also the revisions of individual stories suggested at

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various levels of the corporate hierarchy.

Underlying the newsletter's effort to assimilate employees into the corporate structure are two basic assumptions about literacy. First, the editors assume that in the process of reading employees rely on attitudes toward types of texts evolved within society as a whole, for instance attitudes toward novels, instruction manuals, advertisements, etc. Second, the editors assume that employees create and enter into roles and relationships cued by the text.

The first assumption is reflected in the choice of a newspaper format. The newsletter is presented in the form of a newspaper. The visual layout, with mast, headlines, columnar arrangement, photos, and cutlines, reinforces the belief that this is a newspaper. The journalistic writing style (short paragraphs, inverted pyramid structure, Associated Press stylistic conventions, etc.), adds to that illusion. Revisions, especially at the first and second levels of the corporate hierarchy, craft stories to coincide with news writing conventions.

This newspaper writing style and visual format tap employees' attitudes toward newspapers formed outside the corporate structure. Within American society newspapers are viewed as instruments to convey information and facts, with opinions clearly labeled, for example, the editorial page. We assume the data is truthful, the reporting dependable. So we turn to newspaper for facts about our world. Given this

orientation, those of us who move to a new neighborhood rely on newspapers to provide the information we need to function within an unfamiliar area. We read our community newspapers to "get in the know," to become conversant with neighborhood concerns and social geography. Thus, our attitude toward newspapers is that they are dependable purveyors of information and a necessary part of entering and living within a community. This is the stance we assume when we read a newspaper.

An employee newsletter with a newspaper format also evokes those attitudes. Information is perceived as truthful and reliable; the newsletter itself is perceived as a trustworthy way to enter a new community. So new employees, unsure of their identity within the corporate structure, turn to their newsletter to explore that territory, to discover acceptable social roles within that territory, and to evolve a sense of rewarded behavior. Given this stance, the newsletter can thus provide an implicit guide to assimilation by highlighting certain employee activities and traits, thereby validating the worth of those who pursue those activities and possess those traits.

The second assumption the editors appear to make--that readers create and enter into roles and relationships cued by the text--is built on the first. Since readers approach the text assuming the information is dependable, the editors seem to craft stories that invite employees to project and identify with the social structure underlying that information. This effort is manifested in stories which provide models for employees to

emulate and stories which invite employees to adopt certain approved identities. For example, a major story from the June 16th issue concerns an 18-year employee who received the company's humanitarian award for saving a man's life by administering CPR. This story provides an exemplar for other employees to follow. The text of the story quotes a company spokesperson who explains that the employee "didn't help the victim for reward or recognition. He did it because he is a good person, and one who cares about others." This quote defines for employees the role they should assume in order to be a good person within the corporate community: one who performs a service for neither reward nor recognition.

Other stories repeat this theme of sacrificing self-interest for the good of others, including casting the corporation itself as the one putting community good before self-good. Another story in the June 16th issue, filling a half-page and receiving graphic emphasis, describes one instance of the company's "loaned executive" program. This program "loans" executives with key skills (public relations, fund raising, etc.) to organizations within the community at large. The executives serve the community, but their salaries are underwritten by the corporation. Thus, the company sacrifices its self-interest for the larger interests of the community. The story concludes with a quote from the loaned executive subtlely highlighting that sacrifice: "I'm pleased (the company) gave me the opportunity to serve my community this way."

Revisions within this story also emphasize the self-sacrificing role of the corporation. In the first draft of the lead paragraph, the first sentence read as follows: "Some people may see problems with Chicago public schools but one (company) employee is out to improve the system." In a crucial revision, "out" is deleted and "being given the chance" is inserted, a change which emphasizes the corporation's generosity in providing the opportunity, at its own expense. Other stories stressing individual service to the community, family involvement, and participation in self-improvement programs suggest further roles that employees can assume to become a part of and succeed within the corporate structure.

Not only does the newsletter invite readers to create personal identities valorized by the corporate community, but it also projects a role for the corporation itself and cues readers to enter a special relationship with the corporation. Many revisions humanize the company in one of three ways: by presenting the company as an entity actively engaged in improving the employees' lot; by decreasing the readers' sense of the company as a profit-oriented unit; or by casting the corporation as a paternalistic caregiver and family head.

Revisions aimed at humanizing the corporation generally involve substituting concrete words and phrases with animate connotations for more abstract language with inanimate connotations. For instance, the term "system" to refer to the corporation is consistently replaced with "company." Also, in

one story, the predicate of a sentence--"assist the Chicago school system in setting priorities"--is replaced with "help community, business, educational and civic leaders join forces." The terms "system" and "priorities" in the first version, both words reminiscent of a bureaucratic machine, are replaced with the sense of people--business people, community people, etc.--joining forces to fight a common enemy, deal with a common problem. A similar change was made in another story. The predicate "study the issue of safety on the job" was deleted and "oversee the company's safety process" was inserted. The abstract "issue" is replaced with a sense of an active process, one which an animate company pursues.

Revisions which alter the corporation's role from passive to active, or conversely, the occasional change from active to passive, also adds a humanizing dimension by making the company an actor instead of an inert recipient of someone else's action. For instance, in one story the terms "procedures" and "program" are replaced by the more active terms "efforts." Bureaucrats have procedures, governments have programs, but people make efforts. Similarly, the phrase "also has helped" is substituted for "has provided counsel." The latter verb phrase has the sense of an objective observer making suggestions from afar, while the change implies more participation and urgency. Changes which shift the readers' focus from static nouns to active verbs achieve the same humanizing effect. For instance, the deletion of "on methods to improve safety" and the substitution of"to

improve their safety process," directs the readers' attention away from the passive "methods" to the far more active infinitive "to improve." Finally, in a story citing a speech delivered by the CEO, information passively contained in an indirect quote ("told shareowners that. . .") is recast as a direct action ("recapped [the company's] 1988 achievements and its plans for the future, stressing that..."). Such changes continually emphasize the active role the corporation assumes. The only revision changing text from active to passive recasts the corporation as a victim of an unfortunate event instead of as the perpetrator. In a story requesting employees to resubmit applications for a stock-purchase program, a sentence stating that forms from 10 different states were "lost" is revised to say that the forms "were not received," thus removing the company as the locus of responsibility. While these changes tend to humanize the corporation, they simultaneously underscore the sense of company as paternalistic.

The corporation is presented as a caregiver, not as a profit-making force. Emphasis in the stories is on the employees' interests, not on their productivity. For instance, in a story about electronic mail, the entire focus, barring a single sentence, is placed on employee benefits: the e-mail allows employees to better communicate and connect with one another. The monetary value of e-mail--that it decreases fax and federal Express costs as well as increases productivity--is cited in a single short sentence in the next to last paragraph. Thus,

readers perceive that profit-making is a secondary concern. The corporation's primary concern is to take care of the corporate family. This de-emphasis of profit is more explicitly seen in a story concerning safety procedures. In this story the sentence, "These three elements add up to equal (sic) greater productivity," with its clear profit-orientation is deleted entirely.

The sense of a paternalistic caregiver is further highlighted by the family orientation of many stories. The lead paragraph of a story concerning a company family picnic was revised as follows: from "The response to the first O'Hare Plaza (company) Family Day picnic has been better than expected..." to "If you didn't sign up for the first O'Hare Plaza (company) Family Day picnic tomorrow, you're still welcome." While the story topic itself indicates the family orientation (company Family Day picnic) the revision--with its second person, direct address casualness--stresses the family spirit. It's as if the undercurrent were, "Don't worry if you didn't let us know you were coming, Uncle Bob, come anyway. The family picnic wouldn't be the same without you." This desire to emphasize a family atmosphere is also reflected in story selection. For instance, story ideas which undermine this familial atmosphere are questioned before publication. The debate regarding inclusion of one story detailing the activities of a single division within the corporation illustrates this. A comment written on a draft of the story queried, "Are all employees invited? If not why

run?"

By tapping text attitudes and cuing readers to create and assume certain roles, this newsletter attempts to assimilate new employees into the corporate structure and help veteran employees maintain their balance. Thus, internal public relations departments depends heavily on literacy to be an enabling factor for them. But the important issue arising from this analysis is not the assimilation itself; it's the processes involved in that assimilation. To be an enabling tool, literacy may very well depend not only on cognitive activities but also on the highly affective activities of role projection and identification. If literacy involves both the construction of data structures and the construction of identities, as teachers we need to concern ourselves with both literacy and critical literacy. To function within our society, our students need to be literate. To protect themselves from being a possible victim of that very literacy, our students need to be aware of the roles they assume as they read and write. Without critical literacy, a sensitivity to the identities we adopt as we read, we may be all too easily subjugated by those identities and the texts that foster them.

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